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Proximity-Based Digital Practices in Fashion – Ateliers of Social Integration as Relational Infrastructures of Care and Innovation

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Abstract

This article advances a critical rethinking of digital transformation in craft-based and socially embedded production systems by examining ateliers of social integration as community-led solidarity spaces where sewing and embroidery practices intersect with relational, care-oriented, and collective dimensions. Existing debates on digitalisation remain largely centred on automation, scale, and efficiency, overlooking how technology operates within care-based and territorially embedded economies. To address this gap, the article develops an alternative analytical framework grounded in relational economies and the ethics of care. While the phenomenon is transnational, the empirical analysis focuses on the Italian context and draws on data from CreAbility, an ongoing action-research project aimed at building a digital community of micro and small fashion enterprises, associations, and designers characterized by social and cultural impact. Against dominant, scale-oriented models of innovation, the article conceptualises ateliers of social integration as relational ecosystems in which value is co-produced through social ties, inclusion practices, and localized knowledge. From this perspective, digital technologies serve as situated mediators that extend and amplify proximity-based relations. This reframing challenges linear and growth-centred accounts of digital innovation, instead proposing a non-linear, care-centred, and place-based model of digital transformation. Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative techniques. Data were collected between June and July 2025 through an online questionnaire distributed to a broader population of Italian ateliers of social integration and were complemented by participatory focus groups involving organisational representatives. The findings show that these ateliers operate as infrastructures of proximity in which production, care, and community are co-constitutive, and where digital practices support forms of extended embeddedness rather than substitution. In doing so, the article contributes to debates on digitalisation, social innovation, and the care economy by showing how alternative, relational, and non-scalable models of production can reshape the meaning and the trajectories of innovation.

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1. Introduction

Community-led solidarity initiatives centred on sewing and embroidery have increasingly emerged as alternatives to dominant neoliberal and neo-colonial fashion paradigms. These initiatives—here referred to as [1]—foreground collective production, care-based labour relations, and locally embedded forms of value creation, positioning themselves in contrast to extractive global supply chains, hyper-flexibilised labour, and platform-driven models of fashion production. Although highly heterogeneous in form and scale, such ateliers share a common orientation towards relational economies [2], social reproduction, and the re-politicisation of craft as a site of social intervention rather than mere aesthetic or niche production.

In recent years, debates on the digital transformation of manufacturing have largely focused on advanced automation, data-driven optimization, and enabling technologies implemented within large industrial firms [3–11]. Within this dominant framework, digitalization is primarily examined through its implications for employment, skills, and work organization, as well as for job quality and labour. This limitation is particularly evident in countries such as Italy, where the economic structure remains deeply rooted in local production systems, industrial districts, and territorially bounded supply chains [12–16]. Examining the digitalization of craft-based activities therefore makes it possible to capture not only a technical process, but also the situated interplay between technologies, skills, and organisational forms grounded in proximity, trust, and embedded knowledge.

The fashion sector represents a privileged observatory for these dynamics. Historically reliant on embodied gestures, intergenerational transmission of skills, and dense local networks, fashion production has progressively integrated digital tools for communication, design, and distribution, generating hybrid configurations in which materials, imagery, and technologies co-evolve [17,18]. These transformations can also be situated within broader debates on the evolution of the creative industries, which have progressively moved beyond initial growth-oriented frameworks to engage with more complex, hybrid, and socially embedded forms of cultural production [19].

In Italy, in particular, fashion craftsmanship reveals how creativity is rooted in the material cultures of territories [20,21] and how production processes are inseparable from the quality of local social relations, thus recalling the collaborative type of craftsmanship developed by Sennett [22]. At the same time, critical fashion scholarship has increasingly highlighted the emergence of networks of care [23,24] within alternative fashion practices, where production is intertwined with ethical commitments, mutual support, and forms of responsibility that exceed market rationalities (cf. feminist political economy and care-based approaches to fashion production) [25,26].

Within this broader landscape, ateliers of social integration constitute a particularly significant empirical and analytical case. These initiatives combine craft production with social intervention, vocational training, and community activation, taking the form of hybrid spaces in which economic activities coexist with practices of care, guidance, and accompaniment [1]. They can be interpreted as presidia of proximity capable of generating recognition, trust, and a sense of territorial belonging [27]. Their composite nature resonates with the concept of relational economy [2], according to which organisational value emerges not only from products and services, but from the fabric of meaningful social interactions that sustain individual and collective empowerment. Simultaneously, their practices align with feminist conceptualisations of the care economy, where production and social reproduction are inseparable, and responsibility and interdependence are central analytical categories [28–30].

Despite their transformative potential, these ateliers often operate under conditions of structural fragility. The sector remains highly fragmented and weakly institutionalised, with limited organisational capacity, constrained scalability, and restricted access to wider

markets. Many initiatives depend significantly on public funding or community-based support, which complicates their economic sustainability and renders their capacity to fully stabilise as models of social innovation partially unverified. Rather than consolidated alternatives, they frequently appear as experimental configurations navigating tensions between social mission, economic viability, and territorial embeddedness.

In this context, digital technologies seem to intervene simultaneously as resources and challenges. While ateliers of social integration often operate with limited financial means, heterogeneous skill sets, and a strong reliance on voluntary labour, digital tools—such as social media platforms, e-commerce systems, and online communication infrastructures—offer opportunities to enhance visibility, expand relational networks, and reach audiences beyond local boundaries [31,32]. In strongly place-based contexts, digitalisation does not function as a substitute for proximity, but rather as its extension: a form of mediated proximity through which territorial identities, care practices, and relational economies can be amplified rather than displaced [33].

Building on these tensions, and drawing on empirically grounded insights from the CreAbility action-research project, designed to build a digital community of socially engaged fashion actors, and combining participatory and mixed-methods approaches [34], this article examines how ateliers of social integration navigate the intersection of territorial proximity, care-based labour relations, and digital practices. The analysis investigates how these ateliers organise production and governance, how they appropriate digital tools under conditions of resource constraint, and how they negotiate the tension between social mission, economic sustainability, and local embeddedness. By integrating national mapping, participatory qualitative methods, and survey data, the study advances an interpretive framework grounded in three analytical dimensions—territorial proximity, care, and the use of digital technologies—capturing organisational sustainability, relational intensity, and modes of digital appropriation. In doing so, the article conceptualizes ateliers of social integration as relational ecosystems and mobilizes them as a strategic empirical site to show how digital transformation operates as a situated, care-centered, and place-based process, rather than as a driver of scale, automation, or disembedding.

The article is structured as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework, focusing on territorial proximity, relational economies, and care-based approaches to cultural and craft production. Section 3 presents the methodological design, combining national mapping, participatory worktables, systematic analysis of the ateliers' digital presence, and a questionnaire survey. Section 4 discusses the main empirical findings, with particular attention to organisational arrangements, production processes, and uses of digital technologies. The concluding section draws out the theoretical implications of these findings, showing how ateliers of social integration contribute to rethinking digitalization as a relational, non-scalable, and care-centred process, and outlining their relevance for debates on social innovation and place-based development.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Local Economies, Proximity, and Platform-Mediated Digitisation

A substantial body of literature has shown how the Italian economic system has historically been characterised by fragmented production structures and the centrality of micro and small enterprises embedded in local territories [13,14]. Studies on industrial districts, local production systems, and the so-called *Third Italy* have highlighted territorial proximity as a key socio-economic resource, enabling the circulation of tacit knowledge, inter-firm cooperation, and trust-based relationships [15,35]. Within this framework, craftsmanship occupies a pivotal position, embodying modes of production grounded in embodied skills, long-term social relations, and informal organisational arrangements closely tied to specific places [22]. While this body of literature provides a robust account

of proximity as a socio-economic resource, it has only marginally engaged with how digital transformation unfolds within care-based and socially embedded production systems, particularly outside large-scale industrial settings.

This emphasis on proximity has been further elaborated within the geography of innovation, which conceptualises learning and innovation as spatially embedded processes [36–38]. Proximity is understood not merely as physical closeness, but as a shared cognitive and normative space in which routines, conventions, and interpretative frameworks are co-produced [39]. Such shared spaces facilitate collaboration and coordination [40], support interactive learning, and enable the transmission of both tacit and codified knowledge within localised networks [41]. For micro and small enterprises, which often lack the resources to sustain distant exchanges, proximity-based relational infrastructures are particularly crucial [42].

More recent approaches have expanded this perspective by conceptualising territories as relational ecologies rather than bounded economic units. The notion of “generative proximity” [27] highlights how heterogeneous actors (such as enterprises, associations, informal groups, and institutions) co-produce economic and social value through everyday practices embedded in material culture and shared values. This perspective resonates with broader attempts to conceptualise the relationship between culture and sustainability as mutually constitutive, rather than as separate analytical domains [43].

Within these relational economies, ateliers of social integration exemplify a form of production in which value is generated not only through material output, but through the intertwining of skills, relationships, and social meanings. Knowledge transmission in these contexts relies heavily on practice-based learning, observation, and situated cooperation embedded in local communities. When craft practices acquire explicit social, educational, and care-oriented functions, as in the case of ateliers of social integration, the relational nature of craftsmanship becomes even more salient, reinforcing the link between production, social inclusion, and territorial embeddedness.

Digitisation introduces significant transformations within these locally rooted systems [44]. Digital technologies have been shown to reconfigure the internal dynamics of territorial models by expanding relational networks and introducing new forms of mediation and coordination [31]. From a socio-technical perspective, digital infrastructures reorganise proximity by enabling connections beyond physical co-presence while remaining anchored in place-based identities and practices [45]. This insight aligns with critical scholarship on platformisation, which frames platforms not as neutral tools but as infrastructures that actively mediate, structure, and reshape labour practices and economic exchanges [46]. However, much of this literature remains oriented towards platform economies characterized by scale, data extraction, and forms of algorithmic coordination, offering limited insight into how digital infrastructures operate within small-scale, relational, and care-oriented contexts.

Jarrett’s [47] classification of various types of platform labour is particularly relevant here. In relation to the case of artisanal micro-enterprises and solidarity-based craft initiatives, work is better understood as being platform-mediated as opposed to algorithmically managed. Social media platforms facilitate encounters between producers and audiences without exerting continuous managerial control over labour processes. Although artisans retain autonomy over production rhythms and techniques, access to visibility, markets, and recognition is nonetheless structured through platform affordances.

While these insights are crucial, they remain insufficient to account for contexts in which digital technologies are embedded in care-based, locally rooted, and non-scalable forms of production, such as ateliers of social integration. In such settings, digital mediation cannot be fully understood through the lens of platformization alone, but requires a

reframing that accounts for how proximity, care, and relational value are extended, rather than displaced, through digital practices.

Building on these insights, this framework highlights the role of digital platforms as intermediary infrastructures that support visibility, storytelling, and relational exchange. Digital mediation facilitates the translation of embodied and place-based knowledge into narratives, images, and values that circulate beyond local boundaries. Alongside this, these forms of mediation engender novel dependencies associated with visibility, narrative competence, and audience engagement, thereby reconfiguring the conditions under which artisanal and solidarity-based work becomes economically and socially sustainable.

2.2. Relational Economy, Care, and Networks of Solidarity

The relational economy provides a crucial interpretative framework for understanding the practices developed within ateliers of social integration. Unlike market-centred economic models, the relational paradigm foregrounds the value generated through encounters, exchanges, and the quality of social interactions [2]. Relationships are not treated as instrumental means, but as constitutive goods capable of producing trust, recognition, and belonging. In this perspective, value emerges not only from products, but from the relational processes activated through work, training, and daily cooperation.

This approach builds on a broader tradition that emphasises the intrinsically social and cooperative nature of work. Arendt [48] underscored how human activity cannot be separated from living together, while Sennett [22] showed how craftsmanship functions as a site of moral and social formation, where people learn coordination, responsibility, and mutual care alongside technical skills. In ateliers of social integration, this dimension is particularly visible: productive activities are inseparable from practices of accompaniment, learning, and social reintegration, often involving women and other subjects in vulnerable positions.

The relational perspective is closely intertwined with the literature on the care economy. Feminist scholarship has conceptualised care as a moral, social, and political principle grounded in interdependence rather than autonomy [29,30]. Care is understood as a process encompassing attentiveness, responsibility, action, and responsiveness, structuring both interpersonal relations and organisational practices. From this viewpoint, ateliers of social integration can be interpreted as care organisations, where production coincides with practices of support, guidance, and shared responsibility. Despite its relevance, this body of literature has rarely been connected to debates on digital transformation, which tend to privilege efficiency, scale, and technological optimization over relational and care-based dimensions of production.

Recent contributions have further framed care as a foundation for alternative economic arrangements capable of challenging neoliberal paradigms of competition, efficiency, and growth [28]. Within fashion studies, this perspective has informed earlier work on ethical and responsible fashion, highlighting how material production becomes a site for the articulation of social values and moral commitments [49,50], as well as more recent analysis of networks of care [25]. In these environments, craft practices become vehicles for sustaining communities, redistributing value, and re-politicising labour. The embeddedness of economic action [51] is particularly evident in ateliers of social integration, where production is immersed in dense networks involving volunteers, social workers, customers, third-sector organisations, local institutions, and donors. The value generated is therefore multidimensional—economic, social, educational, and symbolic—and cannot be fully captured by conventional market metrics.

At the same time, the literature on relational and care economies also helps to illuminate the structural fragilities of these initiatives. Dependence on volunteering and value-driven commitment reflects the emotional and community-based nature of care-oriented

work, but does not automatically translate into organisational stability. Studies on third-sector organisations have highlighted the risk of relational hyper-commitment, whereby strong ethical motivation may undermine long-term sustainability in the absence of adequate organisational and managerial capacities [52,53].

This tension is further reflected in the limited scalability of many ateliers of social integration. Rather than pursuing growth-oriented models, care-based organisations often engage in forms of intentional non-scalability [26,54], prioritising the quality of relationships and learning processes over expansion. In this sense, their capacity to function as fully consolidated models of social innovation remains partially unverified, particularly given their continued reliance on public funding and community-based support.

Finally, relational and care-based perspectives offer a crucial lens for interpreting the relationship between the local and the digital. Digital technologies enable ateliers of social integration to extend networks of care, share narratives, and gain recognition beyond local contexts. Communication, storytelling, and representation become integral components of care practices, allowing ateliers to make visible the people, values, and relationships that animate production. Digitization thus does not dissolve proximity or care but re-mediate and amplifies them. However, a systematic conceptualization of this dynamic remains underdeveloped. Addressing this gap requires rethinking digital transformation not as a process of disembedding or scaling, but as a situated, relational, and care-centered process, an approach that this article develops through the empirical analysis of ateliers of social integration participating in the CreAbility digital community.

3. Methodology

The methodological design adopted in this research is based on a mixed approach that integrates primary and secondary sources, with the aim of building an in-depth, multi-level understanding of ateliers of social integration in Italy. The decision to combine different techniques responds to the heterogeneous nature of the phenomenon studied: ateliers of social integration are small organisations, often loosely structured and deeply embedded in their local contexts, and therefore difficult to observe using a single methodology lens. The integration of multiple tools makes it possible to capture their organisational, productive, and relational complexity and to interpret in a more nuancedly the role that proximity, care, and digital technology play in their daily practices.

The first phase of the research consisted of mapping the ateliers of social integration operating in Italy. This was carried out by consulting existing databases, lists produced by third-sector networks, and documentation made available by national organizations such as Black&White and the national network of ateliers of social integration, namely “Rete Nazionale delle Sartorie Sociali”. Additional data were gathered through the systematic collection of online information and the analysis of organisational profiles on the CreAbility platform. This process identified 96 entities that fit the profile of ateliers of social integration, thus forming the subsequent phase of the investigation. All identified entities were contacted by the CreAbility research team and invited to join the project’s digital community. Approximately half of them actively joined the platform, suggesting a self-selection dynamic whereby the most active and organisationally structured initiatives—often those already engaged in advocacy, network-building, and institutional dialogue—are more likely to participate.

The mapping served a dual purpose: on the one hand, it allowed us to outline the extent of the phenomenon and its geographical distribution; on the other, it provided the contact base from which to activate the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research.

Subsequently, a participatory SWOT working meeting [55] was organized with a small group of representatives from the ateliers involved. The objective was twofold: to gather an initial shared interpretation of the opportunities and critical issues characterizing the sector

and to co-design the structure of the questionnaire to be used in the quantitative phase. This phase had a generative function, allowing the perspective of the participants to be integrated into the methodological choices and enabling the identification of the main axes of analysis: organizational models, forms of collaboration, production characteristics, use of digital technology, commercial strategies, and development prospects.

In July 2025, two focus groups were conducted involving representatives from different ateliers of social integration. These meetings allowed for a deeper exploration of the themes that emerged during the mapping and SWOT analysis, offering a broader and more articulated space for discussion. The focus groups were conceived as reflexive and generative settings aimed at eliciting shared interpretations, tensions, and collective sense-making of processes around care practices, organisational fragilities, and digital appropriation. They also played a fundamental role in bringing out elements that are difficult to observe through standardized tools, such as internal organisational dynamics, value-based motivations and forms of territorial collaboration. Furthermore, the discussions helped to highlight how ateliers interpret digital technology not only as a technical tool, but also as a space for storytelling, relationship building, and legitimization, anticipating aspects that were then explored in depth in the digital content analysis phase.

In addition, the development of the sample and the development of the empirical research are underpinned by a deeper, longer-term engagement with the field. More specifically, the research has been able to draw on two years of constant engagement within the same digital platform hosting the community from which the sample has been derived. Such a deeper engagement can be conceptualized in relation to the broader participatory research approach, whereby immersion, engagement, and the generation of knowledge through experience in the field are highlighted as important concepts [56,57].

In contrast to relying on extrinsic means of data collection, participatory research has highlighted the generation of knowledge through engagement, experience, and interaction with the field. In this perspective, the CreAbility platform does not represent merely a sampling frame, but a relational research environment within which interactions, exchanges, and observations accumulated over time have contributed to shaping the analytical framework. The experience gained through continuous participation enabled the identification of relevant actors, the interpretation of organisational dynamics, and the contextualisation of digital practices beyond what could be captured through one-off data collection.

Consistent with participatory action research principles, the research process therefore combines formal data collection tools with embedded, experience-based knowledge, acknowledging the role of researcher reflexivity and long-term engagement as part of the epistemological construction of the study [58]. This approach strengthens the interpretation of the subsequent digital content analysis, which is not based solely on observational distance, but on a cumulative understanding of the community's practices, narratives, and modes of interaction developed over time.

The research also included a systematic analysis of the digital presence of ateliers of social integration. This involved the structured observation of their social media profiles and websites in order to analyze communication practice, narrative strategies, and forms of representation of their social mission and craftsmanship. This phase should be understood as a form of digital content analysis based on publicly available materials made possible by the extensive experience gained during the CreAbility project, which was conducted primarily online. It made it possible to capture how digital practices are articulated in everyday communication, highlighting elements such as visual language, storytelling strategies, identity construction, and attempts to expand relational networks through online platforms. This methodological component proved particularly useful in understanding how ateliers integrate digital technology into their practices through often experimental and adaptive forms of digital bricolage [59].

The quantitative phase of the research took the form of an online questionnaire, active between June and July 2025 and addressed to all the entities identified in the mapping phase. The questionnaire was constructed on the basis of insights emerging from participatory SWOT analysis and the focus groups. It included six thematic sections dedicated to: organisational characteristics, internal structure and collaborators, production and supply processes, commercial strategies, use of digital technologies, and development prospects. The questionnaire consisted of 40 questions, with an average completion time of approximately twenty-one minutes, and was distributed via a dedicated link sent to the mapped entities. The response rate was 34% which, while modest in absolute terms, is significant given the exploratory nature of the study and the fact that the questionnaire reached a substantial share of the most active and productive ateliers within the Italian context.

The final analytical sample consisted of 22 ateliers of social integration, distributed unevenly across northern, central, and southern Italy. The geographical and organisational diversity of the sample suits the plurality of models existing in the sector, including social cooperatives, associations, social enterprises, informal workshops, and initiatives promoted by third-sector organizations. This heterogeneity represents a resource for understanding the complexity of the phenomenon and for analysing how proximity, care, and digital technology are expressed in different ways depending on the context.

Taken together, the different methodological approaches—mapping, participatory SWOT analysis, focus groups, digital content analysis, and questionnaires—enable the integration of quantitative and qualitative observations, providing a rich and multi-layered interpretation of ateliers of social integration as productive, relational, and territorial spaces.

Given the exploratory scope of the study, the quantitative component is interpreted in a descriptive and exploratory manner and primarily serves to support and complement the qualitative analysis, which constitutes the core of the study. The approach adopted made it possible not only to describe the characteristics of the realities involved, but also to explore the meanings, practices, and narratives that underpin their daily functioning and their interpretation of digital technology.

Construction of Items and Analytical Dimensions

In order to analytically connect the theoretical framework centred on territorial proximity, care, and digital bricolage with the empirical material collected through the questionnaire, the study operationalises these concepts through a set of analytical dimensions derived from selected survey items. This operation is not intended to produce statistically robust indicators, but rather at operationalizing the qualitative and relational dimensions that characterize ateliers of social integration, in line with the theoretical approach of the research.

The identification of relevant analytical items was informed by the participatory focus groups, which played a key role in highlighting the dimensions that participants themselves considered central for understanding sustainability, care, and digital practices. In this sense, the operationalisation does not impose external variables, but translate into analytical categories the tensions, priorities and interpretative frames emerging from collective discussions.

The construction of the analytical dimensions is based on three fundamental methodological principles. First, the items were selected in order to maintain close consistency with the literature on territorial proximity, the care economy, and digital bricolage. Secondly, particular attention was paid to transparency in the process of transforming the original questionnaire responses, so as to make the choices made replicable. Given the limited sample size and the low variability observed in some variables, the aggregation of items is treated as a heuristic device rather than as a validated measurement instrument. No weighting procedures were applied, and the selection of the items follows a principle of conceptual coherence rather than statistical optimisation.

Territorial proximity is understood not as mere geographical location, but as a set of practices that keep productive activity rooted in the local context through direct relationships, community networks, and proximity-based exchange circuits. In line with the literature on local production systems and relational economies, proximity is operationalized through the presence of multiple forms of local interaction. Specifically, the analysis considers the following dimensions: the use of face-to-face interactions within the ateliers or neighborhood as communication and visibility channel, the presence of on-site sales activities; the sourcing of materials from local actors such as private citizens or associations, and participation in networks or collaborative ecosystem. These elements are not interpreted as additive scores, but as co-occurring practices that signal different forms of embeddedness.

The dimension of care is conceptualized, in line with the literature on the care economy, as the structural integration of production, support, and social inclusion. The aim is not to measure a 'degree of altruism' or care, but to verify how care is incorporated into the ordinary functioning of organisational practices. The analysis therefore considered three fundamental dimensions, the explicit involvement of people in situations of social fragility and vulnerability, the identification of target beneficiary groups, and of accompaniment practices such as training, mentoring, or social support. Given the absence of variability across these items in the sample, this dimension is interpreted qualitatively rather than through numerical aggregation.

The use of digital technology is interpreted not as an indicator of technological maturity, but as the adoption of digital tools supporting communication, sales, and relational extension, in line with the concept of digital bricolage discussed in the theoretical framework. The analysis focuses on the presence of different digital practices, including social media use, online sales channels, newsletters, and content-oriented tools such as blogs.

Overall, this operationalisation does not aim to classify or rank ateliers, but to make visible how territorial proximity, care, and digital practices are articulated across cases. The analytical dimensions are therefore used as interpretative supports within a predominantly qualitative analysis, rather than as independent sources of statistical inference.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

This section presents the empirical findings through three analytical dimensions—territorial proximity, care, and digital practices—showing how they are co-articulated in the organizational configurations of ateliers of social integration. Rather than treating these dimensions as separate variables, the analysis demonstrates how they operate relationally, giving rise to hybrid forms of production in which economic activity, social inclusion, and community engagement are inseparable.

The 22 ateliers of social integration in the sample are distributed throughout the country, with a significant presence in Central and Northern Italy and a not insignificant presence in the South. Their distribution reflects the persistence of territorially embedded production systems [13], while also indicating the emergence of initiatives in socially fragile urban contexts. This pattern suggests that territorial proximity is not merely a background condition, but a constitutive resource for the emergence of these initiatives, enabling access to local networks, trust-based relations, and community support.

The concentration of start-ups in 2021–2022 highlights the role of the COVID-19 pandemic as a critical juncture, triggering processes of professional reorientation and socially oriented entrepreneurship. This aligns with literature showing how crises can foster forms of entrepreneurship in relational and care-intensive sectors [60,61]. Earlier initiatives, although fewer, indicate a pre-existing core linked to workplace inclusion, sustainable fashion, and textile regeneration.

Ateliers display a high degree of organizational heterogeneity, ranging from formal social cooperatives to informal workshops. This diversity reflects both the plurality of

missions and the structural difficulties associated with formalization, reinforcing their hybrid and often unstable organizational character.

Staff composition reveals hybrid labour arrangements combining professional roles and volunteer engagement. In most cases (16 out of 22), volunteer labour is not supplementary but constitutive, supporting everyday operations and organizational continuity.

Ateliers of social integration are embedded within dense local ecosystems involving public institutions, third-sector organizations, and community actors. Many work with migrant women, victims of domestic violence, people living in marginalized housing conditions, and female prisoners or ex-prisoners. Collaborations include third-sector organizations, social services, anti-violence centers, vocational training institutes, and local associations. In several cases, the ateliers develop basic training courses or specialized internships, with the support of social workers and tutors.

Taken together, these descriptive elements point to a recurring configuration across cases. Territorial proximity and care do not emerge as ancillary dimensions, but as constitutive features of production, while digital technologies operate as complementary infrastructures that extend, rather than replace, these relational configurations.

From a production standpoint, ateliers primarily manufacture accessories, bags, small clothing items and limited collections. Significant portions of production use materials from unused stock, donations, or textile company scraps, in line with the circular economy approach that characterises almost all of the businesses in the sample. Using recovered materials meets both economic and environmental needs and is often an integral part of the ateliers' identity narrative.

Production generally takes place in small series, with labor-intensive processes and timescales that are not always compatible with the logic of the traditional market. This confirms the difficulty ateliers have in positioning themselves competitively in larger markets, but at the same time enhances their uniqueness as places of personalized creativity and slow work.

4.1. Proximity

The findings demonstrate that territorial proximity operates as a structuring condition of these organizational models. Rather than merely shaping spatial location, proximity sustains coordination, trust, and the mobilization of local resources, enabling ateliers to function as embedded socio-economic infrastructures.

Proximity is enacted through dense local relationships and direct forms of interaction, linking ateliers to the territories in which they emerge and to the collaborative networks that sustain them.

The predominance of local sales confirms the centrality of proximity-based exchange, with most ateliers concentrating their commercial activities within geographically bounded contexts. However, a significant proportion of ateliers report on the use of digital communication tools, with at least 9 out of 22 explicitly referring to social media platforms. While these figures likely underestimate actual usage due to the open-ended nature of the responses, they nonetheless confirm the presence of digital engagement, albeit with significant variation across cases. Digital technology thus operates as a complementary infrastructure that extends visibility and relational reach without displacing local embeddedness.

Territorial rootedness is therefore not merely an operational condition, but the enabling context for inclusive practices of care and cooperation. This finding is consistent with the literature on local production systems [13,14], which highlights how territorial economies are shaped not only by spatial location, but by the density of relationships and the capacity of local actors to cooperate in the production of common goods. The territorial distribution of the ateliers further reflects the role of third-sector networks and public institutions. In several regions of central and northern Italy, ateliers are often developed

within already established inclusion projects, whereas in southern regions they more frequently arise in connection with the regeneration of community space or the promotion of women's employment.

Their presence in neighborhoods and communities is therefore not simply the outcome of practical considerations, but an integral component of their organizational identity and of the relational processes through which inclusion is made possible.

More concretely, territorial proximity is reflected in several key aspects of the ateliers' functioning. Collaborations with social services, public institutions, and local associations show how these initiatives are embedded in broader territorial ecosystems, where the construction of economic value is inseparable from the generation of social value. Material donations and volunteer involvement further point to a participatory economy rooted in the community, in which citizens' contributions are mobilized as shared resources. In this sense, ateliers of social integration can be interpreted as examples of "generative proximity" [27], insofar as they transform local relationships into practices that create employment opportunities, skills, and forms of mutual recognition.

These findings confirm that proximity operates not as a contextual condition, but as a constitutive dimension of production.

4.2. Care

Having established the centrality of territorial proximity, the analysis now turns to care as a second, closely intertwined dimension that emerges as a constitutive element of the organisational model of ateliers of social integration.

The coexistence of paid and volunteer staff appears as a defining feature of these settings. Many ateliers emphasise that the contribution of volunteers is essential to sustain daily activities and ensure continuity over time. At the same time, this reliance introduces structural tension, as organizational continuity depends on forms of engagement that are inherently variable and not fully controllable.

These findings suggest that care should not be understood as an additional organisational function, but as an organising principle that structures production itself. In this sense, ateliers do not combine economic and social objectives; rather, they operate through configurations in which production and social reproduction are co-constitutive.

Rather than being interpreted as a contingent limitation, this condition can be understood as a structural feature of care-oriented production, in which relational commitment often substitutes for formal organisational capacity. In this configuration, the partial substitution of formal managerial competences with volunteer-based contributions limits the capacity to engage in strategic planning and long-term development. Care is enacted through dense relational work embedded in everyday organisational practices. In line with theoretical contributions on the ethics and economy of care, artisanal production is inseparable from processes of accompaniment, training, and social inclusion. The constant presence of social workers and volunteers, the centrality of relationships in the personal trajectories of beneficiaries, and the role of training activities point to the production of relational goods, where value lies not only in outputs but in the quality of interactions that sustain them.

The combination of professional and volunteer roles reflects a mode of coordination grounded in interdependence and shared responsibility. While this configuration generates organisational fragilities, it also indicates that care can function as an organizing principle shaping alternative forms of production oriented not towards growth, but towards social reproduction and the stabilization of communities. In this sense, the social mission is not external to production but constitutive of it.

Focus group participants consistently described these tensions not as failures, but as the outcome of an ongoing negotiation between care commitments and organisational

sustainability. This negotiation helps explain the limited development of formal strategic planning processes. The daily commitment required by training and support activities absorbs time and competences, constraining the development of managerial capacities and reinforcing dependence on external resources. This condition reflects dynamics discussed in third sector literature, where strong normative orientations may translate into undercapitalisation or forms of relational over-commitment. In the case of ateliers of social integration, this tension is particularly visible: the centrality of care relations is essential to organisational functioning, yet it simultaneously absorbs resources that could otherwise support organisational consolidation.

Care thus emerges as an organising principle enacted through situated practices, operating within configurations shaped by territorial embeddedness and increasingly mediated by digital infrastructures.

4.3. Digital

In contrast to the structural embeddedness of proximity and care, the digital dimension exhibits greater variability and a markedly uneven distribution. While the use of basic digital tools is widespread, the adoption of more advanced practices remains selective and fragmented. This pattern indicates that digitalisation is not yet as consolidated a dimension as proximity or care but remains unevenly structured across cases.

This heterogeneity indicates that digital technology is not yet institutionalized as a stable organizational dimension but operates as a contingent and adaptive resource mobilized in response to situational needs. Digital tools therefore appear less as the outcome of a stable organizational trajectory and more as a set of available resources that ateliers mobilize in contingent and context-dependent ways. In this respect, the findings contribute to the literature on digitalization in small organizations by showing that digital engagement may develop as an open-ended and situational process, rather than as a linear path toward formalization.

A further interpretative issue concerns the role of digital technology within these organizations. The data show an ambivalent relationship: on the one hand, ateliers recognize the importance of social media, e-commerce, and newsletters for increasing visibility and communicating their identity; on the other hand, they report limited formal skills and a predominance of informal practice-based uses. The use of online sales channels appears more limited and less formalized. While some ateliers refer to online platforms in qualitative responses, the absence of systematically reported data suggests that e-commerce remains a secondary and not yet fully institutionalized dimension of their activity. This configuration resonates with the notion of digital bricolage [31], whereby organizations recombine available digital resources in adaptive ways rather than following predefined strategic frameworks.

These findings extend the notion of digital bricolage by showing that it functions not only as a response to resource constraints, but as a generative mechanism through which ateliers actively construct their public identity and relational positioning.

Beyond its operational function, digital technology also affects how ateliers position themselves symbolically. Online communication acts not merely as a commercial channel, but as a space in which values, relationships, and organizational identities are made visible and intelligible. This dynamic is consistent with patterns observed in cultural and creative industries, where economic value is closely tied to the circulation of meaning and narratives [62]. Ateliers use digital tools to present themselves as spaces of care, inclusion, and environmental responsibility. Rather than weakening territorial rootedness, digital communication extends its reach and reinforces its symbolic legitimacy.

Taken together, these dynamics point to a productive tension between the local and the digital. Although ateliers are deeply embedded in geographically bounded contexts,

digital technologies enable them to connect with wider commercial and relational networks. This process should not be understood as substitution, but as layering: proximity continues to sustain trust and recognition, while digital technology expands, mediates, and rearticulates local relationships across broader spatial scales. The resulting configuration can be described as a hybrid model in which local and global, material and immaterial, and social and economic dimension coexist. In this sense, the study contributes to debates on embeddedness by showing how digital infrastructures can support forms of extended embeddedness, in which local ties are not displaced but selectively amplified.

At operational level, this hybrid condition is reflected in everyday communication practices. Although social media are widely used, only a limited number of ateliers display advanced digital competencies or structured marketing strategies. Online communication is often based on personal engagement and informal experimentation rather than professionalized planning. More traditional channels, such as press releases or print media, appear less central while newsletters are used by some ateliers to maintain direct and continuing relationships with customers and supporters. Even in the absence of formal strategies, digital communication proves effective in conveying the value-oriented character of these initiatives, particularly by making relational work visible.

Brand construction represents a further point of intersection between digital and social dimensions. The ateliers of social integration build their brands through the integration of artisanal production and social mission. Many develop independent brands grounded in sustainability, inclusion, and the valorization of manual work. In this sense, the brand becomes a symbolic extension of the atelier itself, communicating not only the distinctiveness of products but also the social relations and territorial embeddedness that sustain them.

Digital communication plays a crucial role in stabilizing and amplifying these representations. Visual materials, workers' testimonies, and representations of production processes make organizational practices more transparent and accessible, while the emotional resonance of such contents helps engage audiences and communities despite limited professional communication resources. In this sense, digital communication emerges not as an ancillary function, but as a constitutive mechanism through which these organizations stabilize and legitimize their hybrid position at the intersection of market, community, and care. This reinforces the argument that digital transformation, in this context, does not produce disembedding or scale, but contributes to the extension of relational and place-based forms of production.

5. Conclusions

This article has shown that ateliers of social integration operate as hybrid organizational configurations in which territorial proximity, care-based labour relations, and digital practices are not opposed, but mutually constitutive. Rather than functioning as isolated micro-enterprises or marginal exceptions, these ateliers emerge as relational infrastructures of proximity, capable of generating social value, meaningful work, and local cohesion through the dense intertwining of production, care, and community-based relationships.

The empirical evidence suggests that digital technologies do not act as a substitute for proximity or as a driver of standardization and automation. Instead, they function as situated amplifiers of relational economies, selectively extending visibility, care practices, and networks beyond local boundaries without disembedding production from its territorial and social anchoring. In this sense, the digital appropriation observed in ateliers of social integration supports experimental and processual forms of social innovation, where technological transformation remains subordinate to relational intensity, care commitments, and locally grounded organizational forms.

First, ateliers of social integration operate as infrastructures of proximity rather than as isolated economic units. Their relevance lies less in market performance or growth potential than in their capacity to organize and sustain local relational ecosystems. Through collaboration with public institutions, associations, volunteers, and community actors, these ateliers create spaces of social integration in which work functions as a medium of empowerment, recognition, and belonging. Territorial proximity thus emerges not merely as a spatial condition, but as an organizational and symbolic resource through which value is produced and redistributed. From this perspective, ateliers should be understood as relational infrastructures that actively shape local social economies, rather than as fragile organizations requiring compensation or protection.

Second, digital technologies emerge as a situated amplifier rather than substitute for proximity or a driver of automation. The digital practices observed do not introduce automation, data extraction, or algorithmic control, nor do they aim to replace face-to-face relations or local embeddedness. Rather, digital tools selectively extend care, visibility, and relational networks beyond the immediate territory. Through social media, websites, and digital storytelling, ateliers make their social missions visible, articulate shared values, and connect with supportive communities beyond being physically co-present. Digitalization therefore enables an extension of action across space without disembedding practices from their local contexts. In this sense, the digital operates less as a disruptive force than as a complementary resource, amplifying proximity rather than eroding it, allowing relational economies to circulate without losing their territorial anchoring.

Third, the findings point to a hybrid model of social innovation that challenges linear and scale-oriented frameworks. The innovation produced by ateliers of social integration is neither conventionally scalable nor residual. Rather, it is experimental, processual, and grounded in care-based labor relations, informal coordination, and forms of digital bricolage. Instead pursuing growth through standardization or platformization, these organizations innovate by recomposing relationships, adapting practices to contextual constraints, and selectively appropriating digital tools in ways that remain consistent with their values. This hybrid model foregrounds a form of social innovation that operates through intensification rather than expansion, privileging depth of relations over scale of operations.

Taken together, these findings indicate that ateliers of social integration represent an alternative trajectory within the digital economy [44] and digital fashion system [63], one in which proximity, care, and digital mediation coexist without hierarchy. For policymakers, this implies recognizing these ateliers as key actors in territorial welfare systems and local development, deserving long-term support, institutional recognition, and tailored policy instruments. Their significance lies not in their ability to scale up, but in their capacity to stabilize and reconfigure local social relations while selectively opening them to wider networks. Supporting these infrastructures of proximity would therefore enable public action to foster inclusive, place-based forms of innovation that strengthen social cohesion without sacrificing local embeddedness.

More broadly, the innovation of ateliers of social integration lies not in scalability or growth, but in the intensification and recomposition of relationships within and beyond local contexts. This challenge linear models of innovation and calls for analytical frameworks capable of accounting for processual, relational, and place-based forms of change.

While the study provides an in-depth and empirically grounded account of ateliers of social integration in Italy, some limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size and the exploratory nature of the quantitative component limit the generalisability of the findings, which are instead intended to offer analytical insights into a specific and under-researched organisational field. Future research could expand the comparative scope of the analysis, exploring similar initiatives across different national

contexts and sectors, while also investigating more closely the long-term trajectories of digital appropriation within care-based and relational production systems.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: We confirm that our study adopts a qualitative and non-interventional design, primarily based on an anonymous questionnaire and complementary qualitative materials. The study involved adult participants only and did not include any clinical procedures, interventions, or vulnerable populations. No identifying personal data were collected. In the Italian context, mandatory Ethics Committee approval is required for clinical trials and biomedical interventional studies. In particular, Legislative Decree No. 52/2019 (implementing EU Regulation No. 536/2014) regulates clinical trials on medicinal products and does not apply to non-interventional social science research such as anonymous surveys. The study was conducted in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, Regulation (EU) 2016/679) and Italian privacy legislation (Legislative Decree No. 196/2003, as amended by Legislative Decree No. 101/2018), ensuring informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity, and data minimization. For these reasons, ethical approval was not required for this type of study and was therefore ethical review and approval were waived for this study.

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